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A day to be lived. Elderly peoples' possessions for everyday life in assisted living

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ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative interview study about the household possessions that elderly women and men brought with them when moving into assisted living. The move implied a substantial reduction of their possessions since, in all cases, they had left a larger dwelling than the one they moved to. The study gives a glimpse into the everyday life of the oldest old in assisted living. The things the elderly participants brought were of three types; cherished objects, representations of who they were, and mundane objects. The most important objects indicated by the elderly often belonged to the third type, and were preferred for the significance they had for the everyday life of the individual. These objects revealed a circumscribed but dignified life in their private bed-sitting room, often in solitude, where the elderly individuals pursued various interests and small-scale activities. However, this life was organized and preferred by the individuals themselves, in accordance with the principles of resident autonomy and individual choice that are promoted in assisted living. The author suggests that these self-engaged pursuits can contribute to bridging the gap between disengagement and activity theories. The study results also contribute to making visible the private life of the oldest old in assisted living.

Introduction

In later life, people often have a huge number of possessions which they have gathered over the years. Many people will possibly recognize this in themselves, a space at home tends to fill up with things. People keep things for a number of practical and social reasons, and disposing of them involves a huge effort (Ekerdt, Sergeant, Dingel, & Bowen, 2004).

When an elderly person moves to assisted living, where the living space is often much more restricted than that of the home they are leaving behind, they have to make brutal choices about which items to take with them. This selection implies that they have to dispose of many things, a process which has been called *casser maison* (Marcoux, 2001a, 2001b) or *household disbandment* (Ekerdt et al., 2004), both referring to procedures in which a large proportion of a person's belongings is permanently disposed of, given away, scattered among relatives and friends or thrown away. It is argued that this is an existential type of process, affecting dimensions of identity and selfhood, and it can sometimes be a painful procedure in which personal experiences and memories must be negotiated (Marcoux, 2001a). People invest part of themselves in their belongings so that artifacts become part of their identity (Belk, 1988; Morris, 1992). This may take place over a lifetime of experiences, and through interaction with material goods in a larger context of place and environment (Chapman, 2006; Rubinstein, 1990). The disposal of personal belongings may consequently connote an experience of disposing of parts of oneself.

This article deals with the other side of the coin — what household possessions people kept in a move into assisted living. The study involved various aspects of this such as what types of possessions the elderly individual had kept and the arrangement of the articles in the assisted-living apartment. Furthermore, this article explores the existential field defined by elderly people's possessions. I will argue that these possessions are a manifestation of the older persons' past, but also

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of an everyday life of people of very advanced ages living in assisted living. This everyday life challenges the activity theory from the grass root level (cpr. Gubrium & Wallace, 1990). The article explores the following questions: What roles do possessions play in anchoring the elderly person in his or her everyday life in the present? How do dimensions of past and present coalesce into a functional whole?

The study of assisted living in Sweden involves people of advanced age with a variety of medical conditions, the frailest of Swedes. Assisted living consists of housing and care offered to individuals who need 24-hour personal support and nursing care. People apply for residency to the local social services. The care needs of applicants are then assessed, and residency is offered to those who fulfill the requirements. They are usually offered a small apartment, about 25–35 m^2, which is a self-contained living unit, generally comprising a bed-sitting room with kitchenette and bathroom. In addition, the person has access to communal spaces where meals are eaten and activities may take place (Nord, 2012; Regnier, 2002). The residents in assisted living in Sweden have increasingly become older and more fragile during the last decade (SOU, 2008:113). Recent research indicates that residents in assisted living spend a large part of the day in their rooms due to tiredness and fragility (Nord, 2011a). This is an important reason for increasing knowledge about the conditions for private life in assisted living.

Elderly people's belongings

There have been a number of research projects, both in the past and more recently, on elderly people and their possessions while they are still living in their original homes, in which they may have lived for a long time (Chapman, 2006; McCracken, 1987; Morris, 1992; Price, Arnould, & Curasi, 2000; Rubinstein, 1987; Schenk, Kuwahara, & Zablotsky, 2004; Sherman, 1991). A few research projects have examined scientifically the importance of possessions in residential care or assisted living (Kroger & Adair, 2008; Wapner, Demick, & Redondo, 1990). Despite the differences in the setting of existing research on elderly people's possessions, there is considerable similarity in the views of the subjects and the meaning they attach to their possessions.

Many research projects have considered the meaning elderly people attribute to cherished and important objects. Most of these projects have pointed out the importance of the objects in supporting memory and links to the past. Cherished objects serve to remind people about personal experiences and special bygone events. They are links to significant others, especially family members, affording generational continuity. The memories may link to historical events, and therefore provide historical continuity (Kroger & Adair, 2008; McCracken, 1987; Morris, 1992; Rubinstein, 1987; Wapner et al., 1990). They indicate who the owner is. They have been, in some way, symbols of social status, and may be again (Kroger & Adair, 2008). They may provide comfort and a sense of belonging (Wapner et al., 1990). Cherished objects are not necessarily worth much in monetary terms. They could be pieces of furniture, books or china figurines (Sherman, 1991). Photos occupy a special place among memorabilia and cherished objects (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kroger & Adair, 2008).

However, elderly people do not just dwell in the past. The function of objects may be to support the negotiation of new roles (McCracken, 1987). One study concluded that many cherished objects were not linked to memories but to current problem-solving (Sherman, 1991). They may construct and reconstruct a sense of self and identity in transition (Chapman, 2006). Furniture, such as a bed, may be moved to a new place because it serves an important practical function (Ekerdt et al., 2004). A mundane thing like a TV can be an important object to an elderly person (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

Everyday life in assisted living

This study puts the resident's private room and everyday life in focus. Assisted living in Sweden as well as the US has the goal of promoting the older resident's autonomy and individual choice (Eckert, Carder, Morgan, Frankowski, & Roth, 2009; Regnier, 2002). These two aspects are paramount to the quality of everyday life. Research on everyday life in this type of setting has to a large extent focused on communality and social aspects associated with communal spaces (Gamliel, 2000; Hauge & Heggen, 2008; McColgan, 2005; Moore, 1999; Nord, 2011b; Willcocks, Peace, & Kellaher, 1987). One study gives glimpses into the private rooms of assisted living residents but, nevertheless, presents primarily the life in the common areas (Eckert et al., 2009). Privacy aspects of the elderly individual's private apartment or room in assisted living have been studied (Nord, 2011a; Young, 2004). Many of these research projects give a negative and ambiguous image of daily life in institutional settings, showing situations in communal areas in which residents' privacy and individual choice are at stake (Hauge & Heggen, 2008; McColgan, 2005; Moore, 1999; Nord, 2011b). Hauge and Heggen (2008) found that the residents who were in control of their own mobility left the communal areas and went to their own rooms. Hence, they chose to be more private and to avoid unwanted sociality. The less mobile residents remained in the public area in possibly an enforced social situation.

A number of researchers have argued for the positive impact of sociality and activity on elderly people in residential care (Cassel, 2002; Knight, Haslam, & Haslam, 2010). However, the goal of promoting autonomy may add to the dilemma care managers face in letting elderly people do what they want without being held responsible for care neglect if they choose to be alone or inactive (cpr. Knight et al., 2010). Sociality between residents may be an implicit value embedded in care practice, creating dilemmas for staff members in everyday care encounters (Nord, 2011b). The older individual who avoids sociality and chooses privacy can be looked upon as a problem. To bring this issue into sharp focus one may ask if individual choice is promoted and positive as long as the individual does not choose privacy.

This article contributes to the knowledge about everyday life of people who choose privacy by remaining in their private rooms in assisted living. The elderly individual's private life in his or her apartment will be discussed in this text with the support of activity and disengagement theories (Johnson & Barer, 1992; Katz, 2000; Liang & Luo, 2012; Marshall, 2008; Tornstam, 1989; Tornstam & Törnqvist, 2000). Of particular relevance to this text is a research that has shown that the oldest old choose increased introversion

under certain conditions, start to focus on the present, avoid excessively demanding expectations, and redefine their social world into something smaller (Johnson & Barer, 1992).

Methodology

The study involved qualitative interviews with elderly people living in assisted living in Sweden. Eleven interviews were carried out with six men and seven women, chosen to give an equal representation of gender. Two couples participated and were interviewed together. Most of the participants were born in the 1920s. The oldest was born in 1912, and was 99 at the time of the interview. Four participants were born in the early 1930s, and the youngest was 60. The majority had had blue collar jobs. Only one man had an academic degree and one woman had been a journalist. The participants suffered from a number of disabilities and medical conditions. Six individuals were almost 100% permanent wheelchair users, and another four used walking aids, such as a walking frame on wheels. One man had an electric vehicle with which he could leave the assisted living home. Some of the participants were disabled due to conditions or remaining symptoms of conditions, such as stroke, Parkinson's disease or fractures. A few of them were disabled by frailty, bad balance and aggravated disabilities from when they were younger. Two of the participants, a couple, were visually impaired. One man had no physical problems but lived in the assisted living home because his wife was severely disabled by Parkinson's disease. The interviews were conducted in three different assisted living homes in two small, rural towns. The participants had been there for between six months and five years, fairly equally distributed within this time frame. For details, see Table 1.

Despite their severe physical disabilities, the chosen participants had to be in good cognitive health, so that they could decide for themselves whether they wanted to participate or not in the study, and also so that they were capable of following the interview. Hence, their participation was based on informed consent. Interviews were carried out as a conversation guided by a set of questions. Questions were open-ended (Kvale, 2007). The interviews lasted approximately 1 h, and they were taped and transcribed word for word. They were carried out in the respondents' apartments, which enabled the researcher to ask them about possessions they could see in the room. The apartment and the possessions were photographed in their entirety.

The analysis was inspired by the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2011). The analysis used *the reversed analysis procedure*, which approaches the data from two opposite directions. During the data collection and the initial reading of the transcribed interviews, overall themes were allowed to emerge by way of a reflecting, open and intuitive attitude. These themes were explored through line-by-line coding in order to exhaust the data of relevant information, a theoretical sampling procedure in which data codes were developed towards greater robustness. Contradictory data was identified and integrated into the codes and themes. The low level coding procedures also served to generate new categories from which other overarching themes could emerge. The themes generated by these two methods were considered together in order to obtain a coherent view of the findings. Existing research literature was read in tandem, and theoretical concepts were extracted which also informed the data analysis.

Ethical considerations

The project was reviewed and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Linköping (EPN Linköping Dnr: 2010/264-31), in compliance with Swedish law. The respondents' participation was based on informed consent. Other ethical considerations involved the age and conditions of the participants, and interviews were adapted to suit old and fragile people. Respondents were encouraged to interrupt the interview if they felt exhausted, but no one made use of this offer during any of the interviews.

Findings

The new apartment included a bed-sitting room with either a kitchenette or a small kitchen, and a bathroom, altogether approximately 30 to 40 m^2. The two couples who participated in the study had a slightly bigger, two-room apartment, with two identical rooms and a small kitchen in between. The apartments with kitchens had balconies.

Table 1
Details of participants in the study.

Gender	Born	Time stayed	Type of housing	Moved from
Woman	1951	9 months	Bed-sitting-room with kitchen	One bedroom flat
Woman	Early 30s (couple 1)	1 year	Two bedrooms with kitchen	Two bedroom flat
Man	Early 30s (couple 1)	1 year	Two bedrooms with kitchen	Detached house
Woman	1933 (couple 2)	3 years	Two bedrooms with kitchen	Detached house
Man	1930 (couple 2)	3 years	Two bedrooms with kitchen	Detached house
Man	1920	2 years	Bed-sitting-room with kitchenette	Detached house
Woman	1921	3 years	Bed-sitting-room with kitchenette	One bedroom flat
Woman	1922	2 years	Bed-sitting-room with kitchenette	One bedroom flat
Man	1923	5 years	Bed-sitting-room with kitchenette	One bedroom flat
Woman	1924	4 years	Bed-sitting-room with kitchen	One bedroom flat
Woman	1925	2 years	Bed-sitting-room with kitchenette	Detached house
Man	1928	6 months	Bed-sitting-room with kitchenette	Two bedroom flat
Man	1912	5 years	Bed-sitting-room with kitchenette	One bedroom flat

All interviewees expressed satisfaction with the arrangement of their new apartments and with the eventual furnishing and decoration. Some also gave us a full appraisal of their new situation. They expressed satisfaction with the facility, with the care it offered, and with its staff.

The move had implied a very restrictive selection of what to bring since they had all moved from a substantially larger dwelling. All the bed-sitting rooms were kept in good order. No room seemed over-furnished, and the amount of furniture fitted into the restricted space. All interviewees had brought similar things to their new home in assisted living. Gender did not influence the selection to any great extent. Women and men had brought quite similar things. The care home supplied a bed, but all other furniture was provided by the resident. Items of furniture the person had brought included sofas and/or armchairs, tables, bookshelves, glass cabinets and chests of drawers. The small space was arranged in a dignified manner, clean, with nice curtains, flowers on the window sill, and pictures on the walls.

The results show that the elderly people had possessions that were either connected to their past or to their present, everyday life. These possessions can be divided into three categories: *memorabilia*, some of which were cherished objects, *representations*, objects signifying the elderly persons' roles and positions across their life-span, and *mundane things* which were important objects in the elderly person's everyday life.

Memorabilia and representations

Many of the belongings the elderly participants had brought to their new apartments were representations of the elderly person, and some of them served as memorabilia with happy, as well as sad implications. Almost all participants had a large item of old furniture, which was often a piece from the person's parental home or their spouse's parental home. One woman had a cupboard from her home: “My father made that one…it was our best piece of furniture at home when I grew up”. These items of furniture served as a remembrance of their parents and their first home. Only two of the interviewees had no items from their original home.

Other, smaller items included photos, which all participants had in a substantial number. They were generously exhibited on the walls, on top of pieces of furniture and on bookshelves, and were often framed. The importance of photos to elderly people has been shown in previous research (Kroger & Adair, 2008; Rubinstein, 1987). The photos mostly represented family events which involved the interviewees' close relatives from five generations, and showed, among others, parents, siblings, children, grandchildren and grand grandchildren, as well as the elderly people themselves and their spouses. Many had wedding photos of their parents. The woman born in 1925 had a photo of herself and her twin sister, now deceased, hanging over her bed. The girls in the photo were about five. It was not a studio photo but she did not remember who had taken it.

The elderly people's different roles across their life-span were represented by objects in a number of different ways. There were, for instance, traces of their professional life. Some had kept gifts from workmates at significant birthdays or when they retired. Some of them had been members of the union's art club in the place where they had worked. This had left traces in the form of the many paintings that decorated the walls in the person's bed-sitting room. Other decorations represented the participants' home life and leisure. Almost all of them had had a favorite hobby. This is the only representation in the study which was highly gendered, and mirrored the different leisure time interests of women and men. All but one of the women had done needlework, knitting or similar activities. This manifested itself in their bed-sitting rooms in various ways. Small, decorative hand embroideries were hanging on the walls or lying on tables. Most of them had stopped doing this kind of work. The woman born in 1925 had brought her workbox although now it was empty It had painted decorations and was standing on legs.

> “I bought that workbox in 1945… I sewed clothes for the children. I sewed one or two dresses for myself as well, if they were easy to sew”.

The exception was the youngest in the study, who was diligently knitting children's outfits for the local Red Cross. She had several baby dresses in a drawer waiting to be picked up.

The men in the study, on the other hand, had had more varied leisure time interests. Like the women, the way they had spent their leisure time during their lives was evident in their rooms. Sports awards were on display in glass cabinets and on shelves. The man born in 1923 had made some carvings, and a big lamp he had produced was sitting on top of a chest of drawers. He and the oldest man in the study had enjoyed photography for many years. Both had drawers filled with photo albums. A photo of the first man and his wife was taken using a self-timer while on a coastal vacation. He had made a digital enlargement of the original, which was framed and hung on the wall in his room. The oldest man in the study had a color photo of his mother taken in the 1930s on his wall. He remembered that

> “in the summer the hedge between the house and the farmhouse…it flowered, the rose hedge, and I had just bought a new camera and wanted to take a photograph. And there she is, in the hedge”.

His own watercolor paintings also decorated his walls, evidence of another method of producing images that he had used.

All participants had a collection of decorative items of varying sizes, such as knick-knacks, porcelain figurines and glass objects, kept in any available place in the room. These items had embedded narratives which were very private, and often signified other people, important events or a combination of the two. There was a remarkable richness in the narratives these items contained. Even small, insignificant objects had a story. The man born in 1920 had a formidable exhibition in a glass cabinet, detailing his whole life. He had an old calendar with his date of birth next to a photo of himself as a small child, dressed in dark clothes with short trousers and a big, round, white collar. His light fringe was cut straight, but curled around his soft little face. The man kept a number of awards behind the glass doors, from his period as a bowler. There was a photo of a military vehicle he had driven in the army. There were photos of his family: his daughter's wedding photo, grandchildren at various ages and

several photos of his deceased wife, taken privately. The youngest woman had a display of decorative figurines on her bookshelves. She could account for almost every little piece, where it was bought, by whom, for what reason and occasion, what it signified and who had decided what it meant. There was a china figurine with two frogs that she had got from her sister "on Valentine's day. She said it was me and my partner sitting there".

Even though many of the participants' possessions had intrinsic stories, some items were more special than others. The most important object, according to some of the participants, often belonged to the group of small things which had no particular monetary value. In these cases, the most valuable object was an item that contained a narrative of a mythical kind, in that it represented an extraordinary event or person. Cherished objects are often linked to a life narrative (Price et al., 2000). The woman born in 1925 had a small, decorative frog her little son had bought when he wanted to make peace after an argument with his mother. The man in one of the couples had lots of photos and other documentation from his place of origin, Lunde, of which he spoke a lot during the interview. This place has a noteworthy position in Swedish history as this is where four civilians were shot dead by the military in 1931. In the interview, the blind man talked extensively and nostalgically about the old days and family events. He connected possessions in his apartment, and especially things he kept in his summer house, with grandparents and other deceased relatives.

Mundane things

However, few of the participants indicated anything mythical as their most important object. Instead, when they were asked to indicate their most important possession, they chose a mundane, practical item, such as the bed, which two of the interviewees mentioned. The woman born in 1922 immediately answered that her telephone was the most important thing, as she could talk to her niece, who was her most significant other for the time being. The TV was mentioned by three individuals. Four had purchased new TV sets when, or after, they moved. Many of the other participants in the study had acquired new things after the move to their new home. These reflected aspects of their daily life, such as armchairs and lamps. In some cases children had made the new purchases. When she moved, the woman born in 1921 acquired a new suite, with armchairs, a sofa and a table, which her children had bought. However, few things were brought to the new home after the move. The reasons indicated for this were lack of space but also that there were no need for new belongings. A few participants in the study had not procured anything at all after their move. Perhaps the oldest, who would be turning 100 the following year, looked ahead and pondered the uncertainty of how much time he had left when he said, "No, I don't need to get anything … now."

The majority of participants led a somewhat circumscribed life in their apartments, mainly due to disability. Some of the items they said were the most important to them constituted centers in which the elderly person's daily life was anchored, such as a comfortable armchair where they could watch TV. For many of the interviewees, everyday life took place in certain spots in the bed-sitting room. Some had a small, but more or less distinct area in their room where they sat for large parts of the day, *an everyday place*. This place might be a table where they kept things they needed within reach, such as a magnifying glass, a basket of fruit, a bowl of sweets, different pairs of glasses, a roll of kitchen paper, a mobile phone, a radio, magazines or other practical or things for entertainment. The man born in 1920 called this table "his office". The woman who was born in 1925 had a photo of her newly deceased husband's gravestone just in front of her, where she spent a lot of time in her wheelchair, a new piece of memorabilia to support her grieving process. When she moved in, she bought a new table for her everyday place, because the one she had was not big or steady enough. The space she, and others, used on a daily basis was very restricted in size. Since she was in a wheelchair, the woman was fairly immobile, and she said that a CD-player on a small table just 1.5 m. away was out of reach, so she never used it. She could not reach it from her bed either.

Furniture often reflected a particular habit, such as a comfortable armchair where it was possible to sit and read books or newspapers. Reading was important to a few of the participants. The woman born in 1922 had read fiction her whole life. It had obviously been an engaging leisure activity to her, according to her interview:

> "My husband used to say that if I have a book in my hand … then I was gone".

The man born in 1923 had started reading after he retired. However, he had difficulty finding satisfactory light for reading, and was considering buying a magnifying device with an inbuilt desktop and light. He was trying to organize his everyday life with the support of technical devices. An unexpected solution to his problem, which demanded other technical equipment, had presented itself just two weeks prior to the interview. He told me,

> "Now the mobile library comes […] I'm considering going to see if they have any audio books. Such things exist. You can borrow them, and the story is read to you."

The son of the woman born in 1921 was trying to help his mother to get a headset for the TV so that she could listen to it without disturbing anyone. She commented with a laugh on the inconvenience when the volume was too low, saying "when watching movies, one has to guess what they are saying!"

Although no one in the study complained about insufficient space in the small rooms, interviews revealed that the participants negotiated their space, and arranged things as they wanted. The man born in 1923 negotiated his competing needs within the limited space. He joked about his bulky leather sofa, which took up quite a lot of space:

> "This is my small 'show-off corner'. I can't sit down because I can't get up on my own, […] but of course, if I have guests, they sit in it. […] It feels a bit superfluous. Maybe an armchair would have been better. There are those now that rise or recline when you get up or sit down. I've never had one. Maybe I should have bought one."

The man was referring to the kind of armchair another participant in the study had received as a gift from his daughter.

The couple, who both had impaired vision, spent a lot of time in their apartment, where they jointly negotiated space to accommodate their different habits and lifestyles. This was their first common home. They had one room each in the two-room apartment they shared. The man slept in the kitchen, and also spent parts of the day in there. He kept important things on the table in front of him, as did many of the other participants in the study. The woman, who slept in her room, often went to bed quite early, while the husband played his gramophone late into the night. The wife also had different views to her husband on which things were more important. She only had a few high quality furniture items in her room. She said that when she wanted to dispose of them, they were moved into her husband's room, as he was much more interested in objects than she was. His room in the apartment was furnished like a living room with a sofa, small tables, a cupboard for his gramophone and an armchair made by a famous Swedish designer, which had originally been in his wife's room. Some of the objects his wife had given to him had been moved to this summer house. The other couple participating in the study used their two rooms as a bedroom and living room.

When they were choosing what to bring with them, two of the people had taken their disabilities into consideration. The man born in 1928, who was fairly immobile, had anticipated that he would have few opportunities to go shopping in future, so he had chosen his clothes carefully. The man born in 1923 actually experienced this problem, as he could not stand on his own. He had no difficulty buying sweaters because he did not have to try them on. Trousers, however, he had to bring home and try on, to see if they fit. The blind woman, who, as she had expected, had lost her sight completely after her move, had chosen furniture she could easily and safely identify and locate in her new environment. When asked about her most important object she answered:

> "Well, that is probably my night lamp. Sometimes, the staff who come at night to see if we need something, sometimes they turn out the light also at the places of those of us who are visually impaired, and that creates big problems".

And she added: "and it is actually pretty beautiful!" Her last comment indicated that she remembered what it looked like. The way the rooms were furnished to some extent reflected safety issues in terms of the participants' disabilities. For instance, there were no mats to improve accessibility and to minimize the risk of falling. All participants had been provided with alarms.

The participants in the study stayed in their apartments most of the time, and left them mostly for meals or activities in the communal areas of the assisted living home. Organized activities were offered to the residents, which were attractive to some. Decorative items revealed their participation in these activities, such as knick-knacks won in bingo competitions, or products associated with hobby activities. The man born in 1928 said he stayed a lot in his flat because of the communication difficulties he and his co-residents faced:

> "The companions [living here] do not belong to any elite exactly. It is difficult to talk because some cannot talk at all, and some are deaf, more or less deafer than I am. […] They are old people, so they probably have a lot to tell, but it doesn't happen, at the dining-table for instance, where we generally meet".

Instead of socializing with fellow residents many of the participants in the study preferred the company of their relatives. Visits and continued help from family were frequently mentioned in the interviews. Even so, some of the participants chose to socialize with fellow residents more than others. The woman born in 1922 never watched her brand-new TV; she only watched the TV in the common rooms. "I want to have people around me", she said in the interview. Life in assisted living often implies a regular and individual pattern of movement over the course of a day between private and public areas (Nord, 2011a). Many of the participants were able to leave their apartments on their own to go to common areas in wheelchairs or with walking aids. Some also regularly went outside on their own, if only for a tour around the assisted living home. The man born in 1920, who was immobile as he walked very badly, often left the assisted living home on his own. He had a parking space in the bed-sitting room for his electric vehicle, which he used for trips to places quite far away. For instance, he went every week to see his girlfriend who lived in another assisted living home some kilometers away. Without his vehicle, these visits would have been much more difficult. The electric vehicle offered him independence and mobility.

The participants had experienced some mismatches between their daily life and the items available to them. Some of the women had experienced difficulties in anticipating what life would be like in the new setting, so they had mistakenly brought objects they did not need. The youngest woman had brought her bed, which was now sitting on the balcony, waiting to be transported to the dump. The woman born in 1924 thought that she was going to be able to cook food, and she had brought cooking utensils. She never needed to cook because all meals were provided. She had also become weaker and increasingly immobile after her move, so she had to take advantage of the meals provided. Everyone in the study took these meals instead of using the kitchenette and the cooking utensils many of them had brought. All participants had a coffee machine, which they sometimes used to serve coffee for guests.

Discussion

All participants in the study had adapted to the move from a bigger home to a substantially smaller one by disposing of a considerable number of possessions during the move. The bed-sitting rooms were small, yet they offered the opportunity to bring a certain number of belongings, even if not very many. The traces of their former homes consisted of a small collection of cherished or mundane objects. There were also some things that were newly acquired. The results point to the fact that the limited quantity of possessions nevertheless represented important aspects of the individuals' lives, in accordance with former research on elderly people's possessions and cherished objects. The participants' possessions represented continuity in themselves and others, and they linked them to historical events and a personal context (Kroger & Adair, 2008; McCracken, 1987; Morris, 1992; Rubinstein, 1987; Wapner et al., 1990).

The participants in this research project were at a very advanced age and suffered from multiple medical conditions. Many had disabilities and were wheelchair users. They were representative of the group of fragile and weak people who move into assisted living in Sweden (SOU, 2008: 113). The participants' advanced age and physical weakness influenced their everyday lives and viewpoints, represented by their possessions and the organization of their private, everyday living space, the bed-sitting room. Many of the items, which served as memorabilia or represented the identity of the owner, were arranged as a kind of exhibition in bookshelves and glass cabinets in this small room where they spent much of their day because of their disability. These residents were embraced by their past; it reminded them about who they were and had been (Belk, 1988; Marcoux, 2001b). Many of the items could be categorized as cherished objects (Sherman, 1991). The arrangement of cherished objects surrounded other more mundane and practical things, such as comfortable and adapted furniture and the TV. Some of these mundane objects were considered the most important by participants in the study. This indicates that cherished objects are not necessarily the most important objects; the latter could be the objects they valued for their everyday utility. The fact that they included some items which had been acquired during or after the move indicated their special present significance to the owner. The participants shifted during the day between a few spots in the bed-sitting room. A spot of particular interest was the table where some spent a lot of time and where they kept a number of minor mundane objects. These were objects of value in everyday life which they needed within reach.

The participants in this study had reduced their everyday space — spatially, socially, and in terms of level of activity. The fact that individuals minimize their everyday space has also been noted in research about elderly people's ordinary homes. A chair or the TV may become the most important spot (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Nevertheless, all of the participants took advantage of joint activities to different degrees, notably meals, and left their bed-sitting room to take part in those, or even left the home altogether, but back in their bed-sitting rooms they lived a circumscribed life. Even though collective activities are offered, frail elderly stay in their bed-sitting rooms for long hours in assisted living, rather than going to the public areas, due to their great need for rest (Nord, 2011a). If social intercourse in public areas is difficult for and not attractive to a lot of people living in assisted living (Hauge & Heggen, 2008), professionally organized activities may not be an option at all, due to the limited physical and mental resources of these people. A withdrawal might seem to offer a passive life, but I want to argue that the individuals *lived an active life in their small, but quality space*, evidenced by the many practical, objects, both large and small, that they kept with them. In this space they pursued both new and old interests. In the restricted space they negotiated their own needs, as well as visitors', and they tried to solve everyday problems with new things and technology. The important point is that they largely chose and planned these pursuits themselves and they sprang from their own needs and interests. Their leisure activities were not the product of any professional initiatives. This seemed to be a life they had principally chosen themselves, and some of them had explicitly chosen solitude before sociality (cpr. Hauge & Heggen, 2008). It was partly a way to handle difficult circumstances, such as disabilities, as has been suggested by former research (Atchley, 1998; Johnson & Barer, 1992). It can also be compared with research about how people who face increasing disability reinterpret autonomy in order to facilitate their everyday activities and ensure control over their lives (Becker, 1994). This means that the study of the participants' withdrawal to private space is consistent with the promotion of autonomy and choice in assisted living.

A central question is how to look at the fact that the participants in this study had low levels of sociality and activity. It is argued by a number of researchers that sociality and activity are central elements in residential care, and that they contribute to well-being (Cassel, 2002; Knight et al., 2010; Peri et al., 2008). However, the fact that elderly people in assisted living do not choose to be social all the time can be related to disengagement theories, implying positive solitude, a higher degree of contemplation, adaptations to challenges, and a withdrawal from commitments, among other things (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Liang & Luo, 2012; Tornstam, 1989). Disengagement theory has been heavily criticized and some researchers propose a less polarized relationship between activity and disengagement theories (Liang & Luo, 2012; Marshall, 2008). I want to suggest that the activity and disengagement theories can be bridged by a reevaluation of the *self-engaged pursuits* that the study results showed were going on in the participants' rooms. These small-scale initiatives add to a nuanced image of the passivity implied in disengagement theories by suggesting alternatives to strenuous professional activities.

A lack of activity may be misinterpreted as the effect of a pathological withdrawal (Tornstam & Törnqvist, 2000; cpr. Wapner et al., 1990). Also, material detachment may have similar connotations. Sherman and Newman (1977–78) linked elderly people's inability to name a cherished object to a relative lack of satisfaction with life in assisted living and poor adjustment to old age. It would be easy to see the restricted lives of the individuals who participated in this study within a discourse of "dependency, illness and loneliness", which is the opposite of the activity discourse (Katz, 2000: 147). The findings illustrate how activity could be framed in the context of an everyday life for a person close to 90 or even 100. The results open up a nuanced perspective by positioning those who live on the edges of human age limits outside "the spectrum of values that spans activity and inactivity…where non-stop activity is meant to take the place of personal growth in later life" (Katz, 2000: 147, 148). A glimpse into the worlds of the oldest old in assisted living, which is offered by this study, gives knowledge that is important for understanding the everyday life of people in advanced ages on their own conditions. It also helps in understanding the ways they have adapted to a new situation according to their own wishes. The results indicate a dignified withdrawal in which the elderly persons actively engage with their closest surroundings according to their own wishes and needs. These findings place the individual firmly in the here and now in accordance with the study results presented by Johnson and Barer (1992). This suggests a world with decreasing space, time and material things, in which every day is allowed to develop at its own pace, free of requirements and commitments; *a day to be lived*.

Concluding remarks

This study is based on interviews with a very small group of elderly people, and can as such only give an indication of what private life may be like in assisted living. The issue needs to be elaborated in further studies. The study focused on the oldest old with severe disabilities. However, the criteria for inclusion in the study, for instance good cognitive health, may have excluded people who were more disabled than the participants. These might have belonged to the group that Hauge and Heggen (2008) noted could not chose to leave the public areas even if they wished to. Hence, they may have been denied the right to a private life. It could also have excluded people who do not have the ability to pursue own interests in their private rooms. Of these peoples' private lives we know very little. I want to put forward that a focus on the activity and sociality aspects alone of assisted living, runs the risk of making the frailest of people invisible. I suggest that an acknowledgement of the fact that some people withdraw because they want to withdraw, is necessary to make these peoples' lives visible.

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